

12 December 1985

Bush Proves Successful In Ticklish Appearance

Congenial Reception by Conservatives

By Paul Taylor
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In perhaps one of his most ticklish political appearances of the 1988 pre-campaign, Vice President Bush paid tribute last night to the memory of a New Hampshire publisher who had vilified him in print. And, judging from the congenial response he got from his audience of conservative Republicans, Bush appeared to do so without consigning "his manhood to a blind trust."

Using self-deprecating humor, Bush entertained more than 500 New Hampshire Republicans and Washington-based conservatives with a fantasy tale of having tried in 1980 to woo the endorsement of William Loeb, then publisher of the Manchester Union Leader, by offering anyone who could bring off the task some colored watchbands, shirts with alligators on them and Topsider shoes—all symbols of the preppie aura that many conservatives find distasteful about Bush.

As he kept upping the ante, the editorials kept getting worse, Bush related. He quoted some: "Incompetent; liberal masquerading as a conservative; a hypocrite . . . a spoon-fed little rich kid who has been wet-nursed to success."

The Union Leader is considered the most influential newspaper in New Hampshire, and Loeb's editorials were credited with contributing to the 2-to-1 drubbing that Bush suffered in 1980 at the hands of Ronald Reagan, a defeat from which Bush's candidacy never recovered.

After laughing about the tart words, Bush praised Loeb, who died in 1981, as a man of "passionate conviction and strong belief . . . In never mincing his words or pulling his punches, Bill Loeb was part of a great newspaper tradition of outspoken publishers."

The \$250-per-person tribute was organized by Max Hugel, a former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency who has organized Project '88, a political operation trying to keep Republicans from making early endorsements in the 1988 presidential campaign so that they can stay focused on the Reagan agenda. Some have char-

acterized Hugel's effort as an "anybody-but-Bush" operation.

The other current major Republican presidential hopefuls for 1988—Rep. Jack Kemp (N.Y.), Sen. Robert J. Dole (Kan.), former senator Howard H. Baker Jr. (Tenn.), television evangelist Pat Robertson and former governor Pierre S. du Pont IV (Del.)—were listed as cosponsors for the dinner at the Sheraton Washington, but of these, only Robertson attended.

There was an element of theater to Bush's speech, written by White House speechwriter Anthony Dolan, as the vice president had to walk into the lions' den and appear not to be pandering. He got good though not wildly effusive reviews from a house full of critics.

"It was a class act for him to come," conservative publisher Richard Viguerie said. "He didn't hurt himself. He didn't change any minds either, though." Viguerie added that when Bush talks about conservative themes, "he gets the words right but not the tune."

Howard Phillips, chairman of the Conservative Caucus, said he thought Bush had "gone too far" in self-deprecation with a quote from the comic strip "Doonesbury" accusing him of "placing his manhood in a blind trust."

On the more substantive side, Phillips said he was pleased that when Bush ran through an agenda of conservative causes advanced by the administration he mentioned "helping the 'freedom fighters in Nicaragua, Afghanistan and, yes, Angola,'" but said he was upset that Bush did not add Mozambique.

Some saw political peril in Bush's decision to even address such a conservative gathering. "He's running a big risk. If the Union Leader blasts him later on, he's going to look awfully dumb for this," said Robert Heckman, head of the Fund for a Conservative Majority.

Loeb's widow, Nackey Scripps Loeb, seated next to Bush at the head table, said before he spoke that "we have decided on a candidate for 1988—whoever best fights for the Reagan agenda." She added, with a tweak: "Whether that person is here tonight remains to be seen."